
THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

The Perils of Humanitarian Intervention

A Survey of Recent Articles

President George Bush won wide applause when, with United Nations approval, he sent 28,000 U.S. soldiers to avert mass starvation in Somalia late in 1992. Then, last October, after a firefight in the Somali capital of Mogadishu left 18 Americans dead (and 14 others fatally wounded), President Bill Clinton retreated from his own more ambitious nation-building plans for Somalia. The United States, he announced, would get out of Somalia completely by March 31, 1994.

Something, it seemed, had gone very wrong with this exercise in humanitarian intervention—but what was it? Some analysts, such as John R. Bolton, writing in *Foreign Affairs* (Jan.–Feb. 1994), contend that Clinton erred in expanding the original, limited mission. Others, such as David Fromkin, writing in the *New York Times Magazine* (Feb. 27, 1994), argue that Bush failed to face “the question of what would happen when the troops were withdrawn: would not the warlords go back to warlording and the Somalis back to starving?” Perhaps the real mistake was in thinking that the venture would be a straightforward and simple matter, carrying with it no risks, no deepening obligations.

The 1992 U.S. and UN decision to send troops to Somalia to clear the relief channels blocked by Somali gangs and to get food to the starving Somalis was “almost unprecedented,” notes Guenter Lewy, a University of Massachusetts political scientist, in *Orbis* (Fall 1993). “Not since the 1840s, when Britain, France, and the United States dispatched cruisers to the west coast of Africa in order to hunt down slave ships, had the world seen a major military operation devoid of any strategic or economic benefit.”

The Bush administration expected that once the mission was accomplished, in three or four months, responsibility would be handed back to the UN peace-keeping force and the United States would get out. The Bush administration, notes John Bolton, who served in it as an assis-

tant secretary of state, strongly resisted UN attempts to go beyond that limited mission. But the Clinton administration took office less than two months later with different ideas. It pushed the UN Security Council to commit itself in March 1993 to what U.S. ambassador Madeleine K. Albright approvingly described as “an unprecedented enterprise aimed at nothing less than the restoration of an entire country.” Not only this effort at nation building but also the apparent shift toward UN-led multilateralism eventually became an issue, with many insisting that the United States should not be led by the United Nations.

When the United States handed responsibility back to the UN peace-keeping force in May 1993, most American soldiers went home, but not all: about 4,500 troops were left behind. Just weeks later, forces believed to be under the command of General Mohammed Farah Aidid attacked UN soldiers, killing at least 23 Pakistani peace keepers. The Security Council authorized Aidid’s arrest, and U.S. combat forces returned to Somalia to strike at positions believed held by Aidid’s followers. Nation building, it seemed, was now going to be attempted under combat

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conditions, at least in Mogadishu.

Not everyone thought that mission misguided, even after the deaths of the U.S. soldiers in October. The *Economist* (Oct. 9, 1993) urged the United States to stay the course: "Outside a small area of Mogadishu, famine and anarchy have been defeated. . . . If some dozens of peace keepers—not all American—have been killed to make this possible, they did not die in vain. But if the UN operation were to collapse, the whole disaster could start again."

It was unrealistic for Bush to have thought "that a narrowly circumscribed effort—excluding such essential tasks as disarmament, help in reconstituting a civil society, and assistance for reconstruction—would be fruitful in restoring hope in this hapless country," Thomas G. Weiss, of Brown University's Institute for International Studies, writes in the *Washington Quarterly* (Winter 1994). He believes that "international intervention in such civil wars as Somalia and the former Yugoslavia should be timely and robust or shunned altogether." Weiss himself leans toward an active policy. A more cautious note is sounded by David Fromkin, in the *New York Times Magazine*: "If the issue is not important enough to be worth the lives of United States service personnel, we should not be sending in the armed forces."

General Aidid taught America a painful but useful lesson, argues A. J. Bacevich, of the Foreign Policy Institute at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. "The lost battle for Mogadishu," he writes in *Commentary* (Dec. 1993), "has shattered the dangerous illusion that the American military prowess displayed in the desert [during the Persian Gulf War] foretold an era of war without the shedding of American or civilian blood, an era in which American military might would guarantee political order. Americans have learned again . . . that to resort to arms is a proposition fraught with uncertainty."

"Even though it is true that America alone cannot solve all of the world's problems, there are many things Americans *can* do," Guenter Lewy argues. While there is a need "to make realistic calculations of costs and benefits, including estimates of the probability of success," he believes that humanitarian intervention is justified when "the conscience of the civilized world" is shocked.

But "the plight of the Iraqi Kurds [after the Persian Gulf War], the vicious fighting and sieges in the former Yugoslavia, and the starvation in Somalia"—which all resulted in UN intervention—were hardly the only situations to shock "the conscience of mankind" in recent decades, Adam Roberts, a professor of international relations at Oxford University, points out in *Harvard International Review* (Fall 1993). "The fact that mass slaughter in Cambodia, shootings in Beijing, ruthless dictatorship in Myanmar [Burma], or catastrophe in Sudan did not lead to humanitarian interventions suggests that some other factors are involved." These enabling conditions include extensive TV coverage and the absence of "dissent among powers or massive military opposition."

Where intervention is prompted by the disintegration of a state or by a government's evil actions (as opposed to a natural disaster, for example), Harvard's Stanley Hoffmann points out in *Harvard International Review*, it can become extremely difficult to remedy the calamity without addressing the causes that produced it. Otherwise, those intervening "may well be doomed to playing Sisyphus." But an effort to go to the root of the problem could risk, as in Somalia, "adding to violence and creating victims of its own."

Even in *successful* humanitarian intervention by the United States, warns Fareed Zakaria, managing editor of *Foreign Affairs*, there is a serious danger. Writing in *Commentary* (Dec. 1993), he argues that the case against "substantial intervention" in places such as Somalia is not that intervention will always fail or will not do good, but rather that America should not squander its power. The stable Cold War order is now coming apart. "It will take every effort of the United States to arrest this descent and secure the central achievements of the last 45 years—peace and prosperity in East Asia and Europe and an absence of serious rivalry among the great powers of the world. . . . If Washington gets so distracted by Africa, the Caribbean, and the Balkans that it loses the ability to focus the bulk of its energies on Europe and East Asia, the resulting strains in global politics and economics could make what is happening in Somalia look like a picnic."